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Re-entry mission keeps felons on course

So far, DOC is pleased with Plainfield program that treats offenders as residents, prepares them for return to society

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For years, 29-year-old Jimmy Brown made his living selling drugs. In the future, he hopes to rebuild his life by building homes.

If he makes the transition, he'll credit his stint in a metro-area halfway house that has an early track record of success.

The Plainfield Re-Entry Educational Facility has trained and released 88 felons back into the community since it opened in January 2006. Officials say that so far, results could not be better. None of the 88 has ended up back in Indiana prisons, said center Superintendent Michael Lloyd.

Conclusive results may not come for a few more years. About 40 percent of inmates released from Indiana prisons wind up back behind bars within three years, the state reports. That would add up to about 6,800 of the more than 17,000 inmates expected to be released in Indiana this year.

Still, the center's numbers so far are a good sign for people like Brown. Before he entered prison, he said, he was a gun-packing cocaine dealer. "Whatever the streets had to offer, that's all I knew."

At the re-entry facility -- among the first of its kind in the nation and the first in Indiana -- Brown was taught how to use a tape measure and cut plywood.

He learned he could build a house from scratch. It was a revelation.

"At the end of the day, you look at something you've done (and you think): 'I'm part of this here,' " he said during a break in preparing a house for a new roof. " 'I've created this.' It's a wonderful thing."

The road back

Department of Correction Commissioner J. David Donahue can pinpoint the moment he realized more must be done to prepare offenders for their return to society.

It was February 2005, and Donahue had been on the job for five weeks. On the couch in the lobby of his office building was a man who appeared to be in his late 20s. He wore a prison uniform.

The commissioner assumed the man was an inmate on a work release detail but soon learned otherwise. He had been released from a Southern Indiana prison, still in his jail garb, and put on a Greyhound bus to meet with the parole director in Indianapolis.

"He looked like an inmate, dressed like an inmate and was going to act like an inmate in the community if that was what we were accepting," Donahue said.

Re-entry programs began emerging nationally in the mid-1990s. They were an alternative to the traditional policy of warehousing inmates, then turning them loose with little concern about whether they even had a place to live.

Bolstering the movement were studies showing that recidivism is reduced by treating mental health and substance abuse problems and increasing employment.

But the Plainfield center differs from many re-entry programs, said Peggy Burke of the

Center for Effective Public Policy, a nonprofit group based in Maryland. It is a separate facility devoted exclusively to re-entry. Other states, she said, typically set aside an area within a prison for that purpose.

Plainfield re-entry officials say the big benefit of operating outside a prison is that they are able to treat inmates more like the members of society they are about to become.

The center's roughly 300 inmates are known as residents. They wear civilian clothes, have jobs, take classes and are held responsible for getting up on time, showering and eating meals.

"Re-entry specialists"

There are no correction officers in the Plainfield center, just "re-entry specialists."

"You just walk up to them and say, 'Look, I've got a problem,' " said Earnest Simmons, released from the center after serving time for robbery. "In prison, you can't do that. You just don't walk up on no guard and tell him: 'Hey man, I want to talk.' (The guard says,) 'Back up! You can't talk to me out here.' "

Residents have work assignments -- Simmons worked in the laundry -- and many attend classes ranging from building trades to culinary arts. The center introduced the 63-year-old Simmons to computers, an encounter he jokingly likens to a cave man being plopped down in the modern age.

Simmons now works for a nonprofit company called Workforce Inc. that puts ex-offenders to work recycling computers. Gregg Keesling, the organization's president and chief executive officer, sees a big difference between the people he receives from other places and those he gets from Plainfield.

"I get the best success from there," Keesling said. "The guys are coming out prepared."

The hope is to have them come out thinking of themselves as human beings, rather than ex-cons.

Robert Earl Badelle, finishing a sentence for murder in the 1977 slaying of an Indianapolis gas station manager, appreciates that center staff address him with respect.

"It's probably the first time I've ever been called Mister," he said.

Badelle is the only resident to be married inside the facility. His bride balked at the setting, then agreed. "It was like a real wedding," Badelle said. "We got married in church. I was allowed to wear a suit. Guests came."

Among them: the superintendent and his wife.

Still, it's not like being free. Infractions carry a stiff penalty.

Lloyd says the biggest disciplinary problem at the facility is families sneaking tobacco onto the smoke-free grounds.

Lloyd hits the tobacco recipients where it hurts: He delays their release dates. He does this by withholding so-called "credit time" that Indiana inmates receive for good behavior.

Inmates who sleep in late or blow off class may be assigned to clean toilets or pull weeds. A second violation brings a written reprimand. Repeat violations are a one-way ticket back to prison.

Lloyd has given the boot to more than 80 offenders.

"We're at zero tolerance," he said. "If they don't want to make an effort at re-entry, then they can go someplace else."

Changing an image

In addition to educating inmates and preparing them for jobs, the center focuses on health, housing, substance abuse and character-based issues.

And outside groups and agencies have joined with the DOC to prepare offenders for the real world.

Lincoln Bank sets up bank accounts for residents, who learn how to use a debit card by paying for food from a deli on the premises. The Department of Child Services resolves child support issues. And the Bureau of Motor Vehicles helps offenders get state identification cards.

Residents are taught how to prepare resumes and make a good impression during job interviews. To boost employer confidence, the center offers to post bonds to protect businesses against potential theft and gives candid responses to questions about would-be hires.

"Whatever you want to know about him while he was locked up, we'll tell you," Lloyd said. "Was he a behavioral problem? Did he go to school? Did he work every day?

"We don't have anything to hide."

Despite the efforts, ex-offenders face obstacles in landing jobs. Indiana law makes it difficult for them to work in fields such as nursing, child care and home health care. Federal laws bar ex-offenders from jobs at airports.

And there remains a stigma about ex-cons, which DOC Commissioner Donahue hopes to overcome by turning out law-abiding citizens.

"Corrections is about changing behavior," he said. "When I let them out, I don't want to see a new victim. I don't want to see another problem being shifted to law enforcement or to the courts and a community."

Robert Curl, 43, has about a year left to serve for assaulting his ex-wife. On a recent day at the re-entry facility, he and other offenders were repairing the superintendent's office, recently damaged by water.

Curl said the Plainfield center offers a second chance for those willing to grab it.

"There are things here that you can get that will help you," he said. "The tools are here; you can find yourself if that's what you want."